

## A Dilemma for the Humean Theory of Reasons

### *I. Introduction*

We often think about the reasons that count in favor of or against doing certain actions. For example, one reason that counts in favor of my writing this paper is that doing so will allow me to receive useful feedback on its content. Another reason that counts in in favor of writing this paper is that doing so will allow me to submit it to conferences. We're all acquainted with these kinds of reasons, for we act on reasons like these all the time. We might ask how some fact gets to be a reason of the sort I've just described. There are basically two views about this:

According to the Value-Based Theory of Reasons, some fact is a reason to do some action if it explains how doing that action promotes some value. For example, the fact that the road is safe explains how taking that road promotes some value, perhaps the safety of the agent. We might describe this theory with the slogan "Reasons are provided by values."

According to another view, the Humean Theory of Reasons, some fact is a reason to do some action if it explains how doing that action promotes some object of that agent's psychological state, traditionally a desire.<sup>1</sup> For example, the fact that the road is safe explains why taking the road promotes some desire of the agent's, in this case perhaps the agent's desire to travel safely. We might describe this theory with the slogan "Reasons are provided by desires."

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<sup>1</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 59. Here Schroeder tells us what he thinks reasons are: **Reason** – For  $R$  to be a reason for  $X$  to do  $A$  is for there to be some  $p$  such that  $X$  has a desire whose object is  $p$ , and the truth of  $R$  is part of what explains why  $X$ 's doing  $A$  promotes  $p$ . For Schroeder this is a constitutive account of reasons, but this will be an extensionally adequate account of reasons for any Humean Theory provided "desire" is understood in the special sense Schroeder is using it in. I discuss how Schroeder uses "desire" on page 3 of this paper.

Mark Schroeder has recently defended the Humean Theory of Reasons in his book “Slaves of the Passions,” and in this paper I will present a dilemma for the Humean Theory that takes into account the advancements and insights Schroeder has made.

## *II. The Humean Theory of Reasons*

Schroeder begins with a compelling priming case designed to illustrate the Humean thesis:

Tonight there is going to be a party, and everyone is invited. There will be good food, drinks, friendly chat, music – and dancing. But while Ronnie loves to dance, Bradley can’t stand it...so while the fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for Ronnie to go, it is *not* a reason for Bradley to go. Far from it; the fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for Bradley to stay away.

Ronnie’s and Bradley’s reasons therefore differ – each has a reason that the other does not. Moreover, it is not hard to see *why* Ronnie’s and Bradley’s reasons differ, at least at first pass – this is something to do with their respective psychologies. It is because of what they *like*, *care* about, or *want*.<sup>2</sup>

This case couldn’t be simpler, and its lesson, according to Mark Schroeder, is “uncontroversial”: at least some reasons for action are explained by features of a person’s psychology, “such as what that person desires, wants, likes, or cares about.”<sup>3</sup> Seeing that some reasons for action are explained by features of a person’s psychology, one might gravitate towards the view that *all* reasons for action are *ultimately* explained in this way.

This is the Humean view:

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<sup>2</sup> Schroeder “Slaves of the Passions,” p. 1

<sup>3</sup> Schroeder “Slaves of the Passions,” p. 1

**HTR** Every reason is explained by a desire in the same way as Ronnie's is.<sup>4</sup>

Schroeder's formulation of the Humean thesis is a parity thesis that uses the Ronnie and Bradley case as a kind of paradigm example for the kind of explanation of reasons the Humean is pointing at. In this formulation of the thesis, "**desire**" is introduced as a stipulative term meaning "the kind of psychological state, whatever it is, that ultimately explains the difference between Ronnie and Bradley."<sup>5</sup> Schroeder formulates the thesis in this way in an attempt to capture our intuitive response to the Ronnie and Bradley case, our response that psychological differences between Ronnie and Bradley explain their different reasons. As Schroeder says, "What properly motivates the Humean Theory is the premise that we know something about what *does* explain Ronnie's reason."<sup>6</sup>

### *III. The Extensional Objection (Horn 1 of the dilemma)*

The first set of important objections to HTR, which collectively make up the first horn of the dilemma I wish to put forward, claim that HTR is radically extensionally incorrect when it comes to reasons for action. HTR predicts too few reasons, too many reasons, too weighty reasons, and too weak reasons. In other words, HTR makes bad predictions about what counts as a reason in every possible way. If HTR were to fail so spectacularly this would indeed be a critical failure, for we ought to reject any theory that makes predictions so wildly incorrect.

#### *Too Few Reasons*

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<sup>4</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 9

<sup>5</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 9. Schroeder eventually argues that desires used in this technical sense "really are desires in at least something more like the ordinary philosophical usage."

<sup>6</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 7

The first problem, this objection alleges, is that HTR predicts too few reasons.

Here is one case:

Katie is drowning in a pool. Ryan is standing nearby and is able to help her, but unfortunately for Katie, Ryan does not desire to help her. Furthermore, none of his desires would be promoted by helping her.<sup>7</sup>

In this case, HTR predicts that Ryan does not have a reason to help Katie. But Ryan does have a reason to help Katie. In fact, anyone who is able to help Katie has a reason to help her, and they have this reason irrespective of their desires.

So called **agent-neutral reasons** like Ryan's reason to help Katie appear to be reasons for agents regardless of their desires. If this is right, then it looks as if an agent's desires will not explain his agent-neutral reasons and so HTR is false – not all reasons for action are ultimately explained by an agent's desires.

One response to this problem, which Schroeder attributes to David Velleman, is to insist that such a case is impossible by positing that there is some desire or set of desires all agents share in virtue of their being agents that would explain agent-neutral reasons like Ryan's reason to help Katie.<sup>8</sup> There are some difficulties for this approach. For one, it is not obvious that there is some desire or set of desires all agents share, nor is it obvious what a good candidate for such a desire or set of desires might be. Perhaps even more worrisome, even if there were such a desire or set of desires that all agents shared, if this view is correct, it would not be the case that Ryan would have a reason to help

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<sup>7</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 103. Schroeder begins a similar case concerning Katie here.

<sup>8</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 107.

Katie even if he did not have the desire that supposedly explains that reason. But this is one feature of agent-neutral reasons.<sup>9</sup>

To preserve this feature of agent-neutral reasons – what Schroeder calls their *strong modal status* - Schroeder ditches Velleman's approach and opts for a different strategy. He explains:

On the face of it, it seems to be inconsistent with the Humean Theory of Reasons that any reason has strong modal status...but this is a mistake. The Humean Theory of Reasons only says that every time someone has a reason, she must have some desire that explains why. It does not say that for every reason, there must be some single desire that explains why each person who has that reason has it. For all that the Humean Theory says, each of the people who has a reason has it in virtue of a different desire.<sup>10</sup>

Schroeder's point is correct, but his strategy comes with a serious commitment. For it to be correct that Ryan would have a reason to help Katie regardless of his desires, it has to be the case that virtually all of his desires are capable individually of explaining his agent-neutral reason to help Katie. This needs to be the case so that however we reorganize Ryan's set of desires counterfactually, he retains his agent-neutral reason to help Katie. And this is exactly what Schroeder thinks.

Hypotheticalism's favored proposal for how there could be genuinely agent-neutral reasons is therefore that genuinely agent-neutral reasons are *massively*

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<sup>9</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 107. Schroeder makes these same points against Velleman. I include them to demonstrate the difficulty of giving a satisfying Humean account of agent-neutral reasons.

<sup>10</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 108.

overdetermined. They are reasons for anyone, no matter what she desires, simply because they can be explained by any (or virtually any) possible desire.<sup>11</sup>

What Schroeder is proposing is that there are some reasons, the agent-neutral ones, that promote any possible desire. But there is a difficulty here. In the Ryan and Katie case, we stipulated that Ryan did not care at all about helping Katie, and that helping her promoted none of his desires. Now Schroeder is claiming despite appearances that helping her would in fact promote *most* of his desires. And this does not seem very plausible.

The first thing Schroeder does to make this plausible is to put forward a very weak notion of promotion. Schroeder needs reasons to be *very* easy to come by in order for agent-neutral reasons to be so massively overdetermined. And with a weak account of promotion, even if an action promotes one of our desires indirectly, or weakly, we will still have a reason to do it:

**Promotion** – *X*'s doing *A* promotes *p* just in case it increases the likelihood of *p* relative to the status quo (*X*'s doing nothing).<sup>12</sup>

Schroeder's thesis of promotion is a very plausible one, but this is still a long way from a full demonstration that virtually any desire can explain all agent-neutral reasons. How can Ryan's desire to buy a new pair of shoes explain his reason to help Katie for instance? Unfortunately Schroeder does not give us an explanation of the Ryan and Katie case (or one like it). Instead he is content to provide a model for how such an explanation might go.<sup>13</sup> I, for one, am not very optimistic about the model Schroeder presents, but

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<sup>11</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 109

<sup>12</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 113

<sup>13</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," pp. 113-115. Schroeder gives us the case of Mary. Mary desires to buy a new pair of shoes. And Schroeder claims that this desire (or virtually any desire) can explain her reason to believe a given proposition only if it is true. If Schroeder shows this then he will have shown how this reason is an agent-neutral reason and presumably given us a model for how an

since my dilemma proceeds by assuming that Schroeder's overall strategy for ensuring the strong modal status of agent-neutral reasons is successful, I won't present any worries here. Nevertheless, the previous discussion should have convinced you that any Humean theory has significant hurdles to clear when it comes to the too few reasons objection.

### *Too Many Reasons*

A second objection is the too many reasons objection. The too many reasons objection claims that HTR overgeneralizes by predicting reasons for action where there are none. Schroeder presents this case:

My Aunt Margaret wants to reconstruct the scene depicted on page 78 of the November 2001 *Martha Stewart Living* catalogue on Mars. In order to do this, she needs to construct a Mars-bound spacecraft—for no one is going to give her one...the Humean theory is committed to claiming that there *is some* reason for Aunt Margaret to build her spacecraft. And intuitively, this is not the right result.<sup>14</sup>

Of course Aunt Margaret's reason to build the spacecraft on Mars is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to all of the too many reasons HTR predicts. One can reproduce cases like Aunt Margaret's at will. Schroeder himself thinks we have a reason to eat our

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explanation of agent-neutral reasons might go on his account. This model could then presumably be extended to account for all agent-neutral reasons (though of course this task would be too cumbersome). Schroeder's story for how it is that Mary's desire to buy a new pair of shoes supports her reason to believe any given proposition only if it is true is simple. Knowing the truth of at least some things will promote Mary's desire of buying new shoes (where the mall is, how to get there, etc.). Now there are other facts that seem irrelevant to Mary's quest to buy new shoes (knowing how many moons orbit Jupiter), but this is false. For having false beliefs about seemingly irrelevant facts might lead to having false beliefs about facts central to the promotion of Mary's desire. So Mary has a reason to believe any proposition just in case it is true. This is Schroeder's model.

<sup>14</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 84

car (it provides you with your daily supplement of iron), though he does think you have much greater reason not to.<sup>15</sup>

As Schroeder notes, the traditional Humean response to this objection is to simply adopt restrictions on the kind of desires that are reasons-giving.<sup>16</sup> Schroeder explains:

Perhaps, for example, a desire like hers (Aunt Margaret) would not survive in reflective equilibrium, or could easily be cleansed by cognitive psychotherapy. Or perhaps, being merely a whim, it is not something that she desires to desire, or genuinely values, or sincerely has as one of her central life projects.<sup>17</sup>

But this tactic of restriction is simply not going to work. For one thing, it certainly seems possible that Aunt Margaret's desire would survive reflective equilibrium or some other restriction. And it's also possible that Ronnie's desire to dance would not survive some kind of restriction.

The point is this tactic of restriction seems to run exactly counter to the kind of looseness we needed to deal with the too few reasons objection. Of course, it's possible we will find the exact correct restriction that keeps all of the reasons we want in and all of the ones we don't out, but at least on the face of it this is going to be a very difficult balancing act.

### *Too Weighty, Too Weak*

All of this brings us to the final objection of the first horn of the dilemma for HTR, that HTR predicts too weighty reasons and too weak reasons. So far we have seen how the pressures of the too few reasons objection pushed in one direction, while the pressures of the too many reasons objection pushed in the opposite objection. Now we

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<sup>15</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," pp. 95-96

<sup>16</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," pp. 84-85

<sup>17</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," pp. 85-86



have another pressure, one that pushes in a completely new direction. If the too few reasons objection was analogous to the claim that the Humean was hitting too few targets and the too many reasons objection was analogous to the claim that he was hitting too many targets, the too weighty, too weak objection is analogous to the claim that the Humean is not hitting the bull's-eyes on the targets he is managing to hit.

Let us return once again to the agent-neutral reasons we considered in the too few reasons objection. Whatever proposal we take to solve this problem there is still going to be the problem of ensuring that these reasons have the appropriate weight. Suppose Velleman is correct that all agents share a single desire that explains their agent-neutral reasons. To guarantee that agent-neutral reasons are the same weight for everyone, we will also have to assume that all agents possess this desire in the same degree, and that acting on these reasons in different ways will promote this desire in the same degree for all agents.

But such a view is even less plausible than the initial one, that all agents merely shared a certain desire. Surely cold-blooded Ryan, for instance, who cares not one whit about Katie, doesn't have this shared desire in the same quantity as the rest of us. Similarly, if Schroeder's view is correct, it is highly unlikely that helping Katie promotes Ryan's desires as much as it would the desires of a more caring individual. While Schroeder is able to guarantee that Ryan has some reason to help Katie, it appears that his view is committed to predicting that helping Katie promotes his desires in a much weaker and more indirect way than that of other people.

Very similar remarks can be made for Aunt Margaret and all of the other extra reasons the Humean is forced to countenance. If Aunt Margaret cares a great deal about

her space mission, it seems the Humean is forced to admit that this reason is quite weighty. On the other hand, Ronnie's ordinary but much weaker desire to dance will be awarded with a lower weight than Aunt Margaret's reason.

Finally, there seems to be a return of a difficulty we've already mentioned with regard to agent-neutral reasons, the difficulty of ensuring their strong modal status. Not only does the Humean need to be able to ensure that an agent-neutral reason would remain a reason regardless of whether he would have had the desire that explains it, he also needs to guarantee that that reason's weight would remain the same regardless of the presence of the particular desire that explains it. The bottom line is that the competing pressures to address the various aspects of the extensional objection look incredibly difficult to simultaneously satisfy, so we should not be optimistic about the possibility of a future Humean solution to these problems.

#### *IV. The Explanatory Objection (Horn 2 of the dilemma)*

Schroeder rightly wants to escape the extensional objection. But how? The Humean is committed to the view that desires explain reasons. Since this is the case it seems that the Humean must confront the extensional objection head-on.

But Schroeder thinks there is another way. Instead of putting forward restrictions on the kinds of desires that explain reasons, Schroeder opts for a change in *how* desires explain reasons. If desires explain reasons differently than we've been assuming, then the extensional objection will rest on mistaken presuppositions and so be neutralized, or so Schroeder thinks.

The way that we have been assuming desires explain reasons that Schroeder wishes to reject is called Proportionalism. This is the view:

**Proportionalism:** When a reason is explained by a desire, as in Ronnie's case, its weight varies in proportion to the strength of that desire, and to how well the action promotes that desire.<sup>18</sup>

Obviously Proportionalism is a very natural thesis and, as Schroeder notes, is "a thesis that is universally thought to go along with the Humean Theory of Reasons."<sup>19</sup> It's also a thesis that we have implicitly been assuming in our response to the Ronnie and Bradley case. As Schroeder himself notes, if we vary the strength of Ronnie's desire to go dancing, or the likelihood that Ronnie will get to dance at the party, we think that Ronnie's reason varies proportionally.<sup>20</sup> But Schroeder thinks the Humean ought to reject Proportionalism, and occupy a theoretical space heretofore unknown to exist. If possible, such a move would place us out of the crosshairs of the extensional objection. But in rejecting Proportionalism Schroeder faces an important question: If it isn't the strength of desires and how well an action promotes these desires that explains a reason's weight, what does?

Since I'm pressed for space I won't answer that question here. The important thing to know about Schroeder's account of reasons' weight for the purposes of my dilemma is really just something that follows from the rejection of Proportionalism: When a desire explains a reason according to Schroeder, it does not also explain that reason's weight. Instead a reason's weight is determined by a whole host of other facts.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 98

<sup>19</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 98

<sup>20</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 98

<sup>21</sup> In this footnote I will attempt to do my best to give a succinct account of how Schroeder accounts for a reason's weight. Here goes. Schroeder's account of reasons' weight is a recursive account that bottoms out in two ways (138):

**Weight Base** – One way for set of reasons *A* to be weightier than set of reasons *B* is for set *B* to be empty, but *A* non-empty.

All right. Now for the problem. Recall Schroeder's formulation of the Humean Theory of Reasons:

**HTR** Every reason is explained by a desire in the same way as Ronnie's is.<sup>22</sup> Recall also that Schroeder is using the term desire here in a special sense as "the kind of psychological state, whatever it is, that ultimately explains the difference between Ronnie and Bradley."<sup>23</sup> And this meant that a successful Humean explanation would have to explain Ronnie's reason in a way that would also explain the difference between Ronnie and Bradley.

But with the rejection of Proportionalism, this cannot be done. An individual desire cannot explain the difference between Ronnie and Bradley. Consider first one kind of difference between them, a difference in reasons. Ronnie has a reason Bradley lacks, and Bradley has a reason Ronnie lacks. "The fact that there will be dancing at the party" is a reason for Ronnie to go to the party that is explained by his desire to dance. This same fact is a reason for Bradley to stay away that is explained by his desire not to dance. So there is a difference of reasons between them. But once Proportionalism is rejected there is no difference. "The fact that there will be dancing at the party" is both a reason to go to the party and a reason to stay away for both of them. This fact is a reason to go to the party because of Ronnie's desire to dance, but it is a reason for him to stay away from the party because parties with dancing tend to attract his ex-girlfriend Isabel whom he can't stand. This fact is a reason for Bradley to stay away because he desires not to dance,

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**Weight Recursion** – The other way for set of reasons *A* to be weightier than set of reasons *B* is for the set of all (right kind of) reasons to place more weight on *A* to be weightier than the set of all the (right kind of) reasons to place more weight on *B*.

So, strictly speaking, individually reasons do not carry "weight." Instead facts about whether one reason is weightier than another reason will be determined by other reasons, reasons of the right kind, not by the desire that explains that reason. See Chapter 7 in Schroeder for more.

<sup>22</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 9

<sup>23</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 9

but it is a reason for him to go to the party because Bradley has a crush on Isabel and these sorts of parties tend to attract her.

You might think I'm cheating here by introducing new information to the case, but you would be wrong. Recall that Schroeder had to weaken promotion in order to secure agent-neutral reasons and avoid the extensional objection. The weakening of this relation is not incidental to the rejection of Proportionalism. It is necessary to make the view plausible. But now we have a problem. Since almost every action will have at least some reason to do it (Schroeder thinks we have a reason to eat our car after all), it is going to be very difficult to fix the case so that "the fact that there will be dancing at the party" will not provide both Ronnie and Bradley with some reason to go to the party and some reason to stay away. Since neither Ronnie nor Bradley's desires can explain the difference between them, Schroeder's account suffers from widespread explanatory failure; he cannot even account for a difference in his paradigm case. And this explanatory failure would occur even if we could somehow stipulate that Bradley has no desire that would explain a reason for him to go to the party. For the explanation of Ronnie and Bradley's reasons is supposed to be a generalizable explanation. And it is clear by now that there will be very many cases in which a difference of this sort will not be borne out.

But at this point you may be getting impatient with me. For it's fairly clear that the salient difference between Ronnie and Bradley is not a difference of reasons but a difference of *weighty* reasons. Ronnie has a weighty reason to go to the party which is explained by the fact that there will be dancing at the party. And this same fact explains why Bradley has a weighty reason to stay away. And to this point I say, exactly.

The salient difference between Ronnie and Bradley is and always has been a difference in weighty reasons, but in rejecting Proportionalism Schroeder has made it impossible to explain this difference from a single desire, like Ronnie's desire to dance. Since Schroeder has cut the tie between the strength of a desire and its weight, a single desire can do little more than explain the existence of a reason, and this is not enough to explain the difference between Ronnie and Bradley.

At this point one might suggest that Schroeder can back up a little off his initial claim that the Humean Theory needs to explain the difference between Ronnie and Bradley. But I don't think Schroeder would be happy with this, and neither should we. As Schroeder himself admits "...if most actions have at least some *poor* reason in favor of them, true bare existential claims about reasons will be hardly informative at all."<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, if we reject Proportionalism, this is all we are left with. And a hardly informative explanation is hardly better than no explanation at all.

I am now in a position to succinctly state the dilemma for HTR. Either the Humean accepts Proportionalism or he does not. If he does, then he faces widespread extensional failure. If he does not, then he faces widespread explanatory failure. Since either of these failures would be critical, we have good reason to believe that all Humean theories are false.

#### *V. Upshot*

In retrospect it was more than a little odd that Schroeder motivated his Humeanism with the Ronnie and Bradley case only to admit later that our response to this case implicitly accepted the Proportionalism he later rejects. We can now see where the pressure to accept Proportionalism comes from. It exists in the very kind of case used to

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<sup>24</sup> Schroeder "Slaves of the Passions," p. 95

motivate the theory in the first place. But we have also seen that the acceptance of this intuitively attractive view carries with it serious liabilities. So what are we to do?

Perhaps surprisingly, I think these motivating intuitions can actually be fairly easily captured by a Value-Based Theory of Reasons, and I think this lends some good support to the Value-Based Theory. If Proportionalism is plausible on its own, and a Value-Based Theory can accommodate Proportionalism better than any Humean Theory, so much the better for the Value-Based Theory.

Here is a sketch of a plausible Value-Based Explanation of Ronnie's reason. Ronnie's enjoyment of dancing is in this case, a good. Ronnie's enjoyment is non-sadistic, he deserves this enjoyment, he's not shirking any important duties by dancing, etc. Because going to the party would promote the good of Ronnie's enjoying dancing, Ronnie has a reason to go to the party that is explained by a psychological fact: the fact that he enjoys dancing. Furthermore we can see that his reason to go to the party that is based on his enjoyment of dancing would vary proportionally to the strength of his psychological state and to how well going to the party would promote this psychological state.

Since the value being promoted here is directly tied to Ronnie's psychological state, we can see how Ronnie's psychological state explains his reason to go to the party. Additionally our explanation can explain the difference between Ronnie and Bradley since Ronnie's enjoyment of dancing explains why he has a weighty reason that Bradley lacks. And finally, this explanation is better than the explanation the Humean can give since we know why his psychological state explains his reason. If there were nothing valuable in Ronnie's enjoyment of dancing, he would not have the reason he does.

Schroeder began his book by considering a particular Humean thought, that if there are cases of reasons being explained by desires, that there can be no unity in the explanation of what counts as a reason unless all explanations work in this way. But this would be true only if there were no such thing as a derivative explanation. And since we can plausibly explain Ronnie and Bradley's reasons via a psychological state in a way that is derivative on the ultimate explanation of these reasons via values, legitimate desire-based explanations are no threat to unity for the Value-Based Theory. As it turns out, the Value-Based Theory can capture some of the intuitions that motivated the Humean even better than the Humean can.



### Bibliography

Schroeder, Mark [2007]. *Slaves of the Passions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.